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Case Managers and the Freshman Academy Learning Community: The Results of Involving a Variety of Campus Personnel in First-Year Student Mentoring

Abstract

Johnson C. Smith University, a historically black university in North Carolina, created a Case Manager Program for their Freshman Academy Learning Community. This case study describes how the program was designed, implemented, and assessed. Case Managers are neither faculty nor student affairs professionals yet they are an integral part of the Freshman Academy initiative where thirty students are blocked into a cohort, each enrolled in 15 or 16 credit hours—one of which is the weekly freshman orientation class designed to help students transition from high school. Case managers assist team leaders and faculty members with students who need additional support or guidance related to class attendance, accessing campus resources, referrals for services, and co-curricular activities. A discussion of mentoring as a student engagement strategy to promote successful student persistence and retention is included as are implications for mentoring practice and research in the first year of college.

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**Case Managers and the Freshman Academy
Learning Community:
The Results of Involving a Variety of Campus
Personnel in First-Year Student Mentoring**

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The purpose of this case study is to show how the Case Manager Program in a Freshman Academy Learning Community was designed, implemented and assessed. Case Managers are neither faculty nor student affairs professionals, yet they are an integral part of the Freshman Academy initiative. A discussion of mentoring as a student engagement strategy to promote successful student persistence and retention is included as are implications for mentoring practice and research in the first year of college. The case study was conducted at a historically black university in North Carolina.

In an effort to provide as many caring adults as possible to guide students through their first college year, Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU), a historically black university in Charlotte, North Carolina, expanded the number of university faculty and staff members interacting with distinct cohorts of students in its first-year program, the Freshman Academy Learning Community. In addition to the typical faculty members, resident assistants, and other student affairs staff who are the likely members of any first-year orientation program, the new personnel interacting with students included the director of public relations, the director of alumni, the benefits coordinator, the director of career services, and the archival services librarian, to name a few.

JCSU is a small, private, comprehensive university with a large population of first-generation college students. The student body is comprised of 28% North Carolina residents, 12% South Carolina residents, and 60% out-of-state students;

therefore, many of the students are far from home for the first time and unfamiliar with college policies and procedures. Because of these factors and others, JCSU decided to place students into learning communities since research suggests that learning communities impact student retention positively. According to Cross (1998), "Like other efforts to enhance student involvement in learning as cooperative learning and classroom assessment, there is ample evidence to support the contention that their application enhances student learning and persistence and enriches faculty professional lives."

Students in the Freshman Academy Learning Community were blocked into cohorts of 30 students, each enrolled in 15 or 16 credit hours. One of these credit hours was the freshman orientation class required for all freshmen. The orientation class met once a week to help freshmen transition from high school. Class topics engaged students in tasks and discussions typical of first-year programs: negotiating campus policies and resources, registering for classes, learning about academic support services, managing time, calculating a GPA, choosing a major, and other topics. Many of the mentors (mentor is the term used at JCSU for a freshman advisor who is typically the teacher of the orientation class) were faculty members who taught another academic course in the block.

Since 1995, the orientation class has involved faculty and student affairs personnel as the teachers (mentors) of first-year students. New to this orientation program was the introduction of case managers, who are non-academic or typical student affairs staff members to each block. The job of the case managers was to assist the team leaders and block faculty members with students in need of additional support or guidance, i.e., transitioning from high school to college, class attendance, accessing campus resources, appropriate referrals, and cocurricular activities.

One of the goals of JCSU's orientation class was to establish a mutually rewarding relationship between mentors and their students in order to:

- Guide students as they explore the purposes and goals for college
- Assist students in developing strategies for self-assessment and being successful in college
- Assess progress and provide early intervention when appropriate
- Teach students university literacy (relationships, policies, procedures, and resources)

Case managers were added to the learning community blocks to provide additional mentors to help freshmen achieve these goals, as well as to lend a hand to faculty members in the blocks. Moreover, the designers of the freshman academy looking for freshmen mentors from a variety of campus personnel wondered if freshmen would be more receptive to guidance from someone who

was not grading their academic or social performance as do faculty and residence life staff members.

Results from the first year of the case manager program showed that students, faculty, and student affairs staff members benefited from different campus personnel serving as mentors. Faculty and staff members received additional support in guiding first-year students in their orientation and academic classes. In addition, case managers reported that their campus jobs were enhanced by their direct interaction with students. Students stated that they enjoyed working with their case managers. Hence, the campus became more collaborative and supportive because of better communication across a variety of campus populations, departments, and offices.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to show how the Case Manager Program in JCSU's Freshman Academy Learning Community was designed, implemented, and assessed. A discussion of mentoring as a student engagement strategy to promote successful student persistence and retention follows, as do implications for mentoring practice and research in the first year of college.

Literature Review

Student Engagement as a Means to Successful Student Persistence and Retention

The literature on the causes of persistence and retention of first-year college students suggests that involvement with faculty and staff members is critical in keeping students engaged in school. The National Survey of Student Engagement Institute for Effective Educational Practice (2005) defines student engagement in four domains: degree of involvement and integration, amount of psychological and cognitive effort involved, commitment to time on task, and interacting with the environment. The conceptual designer of the National Survey of Student Engag, George Kuh, draws his conclusions from the works of Astin (1991 and 1993); Pascarella and Terenzini (1991); Pace (1980); Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and associates (1991); Tinto (1997); Ewell (1997); Gabelnick (1990); and others. They concur that chances of improving student academic success increase as a campus engages in strong academic expectations, practical learning experiences, quality faculty-student and student-student interaction, and excellent campus life.

Perhaps the best-known set of engagement indicators is the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). These principles include student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning.

Astin (1993) found correlations between involvement theory and student retention: "Practically all the involvement variables showing positive associations with retention suggest high involvement with faculty, with fellow students, or with academic work" (pp. 196-7). Endo and Harper (1982) found that students'

involvement with college life, in particular contact with faculty, increases their acquisition of knowledge and development of skill and promotes persistence. And among those who do persist, “students who report higher levels of contact with peers and faculty” also have better demonstrations of learning over their college careers than students with lower levels of contact with peers and faculty (Endo & Harper, 1982, p. 135).

Researchers suggest two characteristics that promote educational resilience: a student-centered model of classroom instructions that emphasizes more active student learning with teachers acting as facilitators of learning, and caring and support. Caring is probably the most important tool for fostering resilience, but it does not necessarily have to come from family members. It is this notion of caring and support that guides mentoring programs and mentors. It is also at the heart of learning community theory.

Mentoring Programs and Mentors

Research suggests that mentoring programs can improve the academic performance and persistence of students. Wide-ranging contact with faculty is an essential element to student life, an element that is critical in the formative years of a college career (Tinto, 1987). In addition, mentoring systems that involve the efforts of the administrative, academic, and student support services units on campus can result in many beneficial outcomes for students and faculty alike (Canton and James, 1999).

Reynolds (2003) discusses mentoring, or “good advising,” in “Faculty Advising at Small Colleges: Realities and Responses”:

Like good teaching, good advising is about relationships among students, faculty, and a subject or field. It raises more questions than it provides answers. It depends less on technique (although technique matters) than on authenticity. (p. 21)

Although there is a good deal of research on the benefits of mentoring, the discussion of kinds of college mentors is limited.

Research on faculty-student and student-student affair personnel mentoring interactions dominates the literature. There is some literature on the interactions of librarians and student interactions (Barefoot, 2006; Berry, 2002). There is also some literature on the interactions of students with faculty and staff members in living-learning environments (Cove & Love, 1995; Frenzel & Hessler, 2001; Gabelnick; Lenning & Ebberts, 1999). However, there is little literature on the interactions of students with other university personnel, such as the personnel who make up JCSU’s Case Manager Program, and how they might impact student engagement and retention. Preliminary findings from this research study suggest that using staff members from a variety of campus departments as student mentors may impact student engagement and retention differently from

the interaction between students and faculty and student affairs personnel.

Methods

Research implies that student engagement and good mentoring are key elements to student success in college. Both academic and social supports promote student retention and are critical to the holistic development of students; one without the other creates a serious imbalance. How did the JCSU case managers mentor and engage students in both an academic and social arena? Case managers participated in a series of training sessions that familiarized them with campus-wide resources, including counseling and health services, financial aid, housing, campus security, student accounts, and residence life. Additional technical training on Moodle (classroom management tool) and AS-400 (university management tool) assisted case managers in accessing student academic data to review how they were doing in their studies and what kind of work they were doing in their classes. Case managers maintained electronic student contact sheets to document their student interactions, including the subject and method of the contacts as well as the source of referrals.

Case managers met with students through a variety of ways. Some of the case managers introduced themselves to the students in the mandatory orientation class. Other case managers organized service learning and cocurricular activities in their blocks and participated in them. In addition, team leaders and block faculty called upon case managers to assist with students needing additional help and support throughout the semester on an as-needed basis. The case managers used face-to-face appointments and visits to student classes and dorm rooms, as well as contacting students via phone and e-mail.

Since JCSU is a ThinkPad University (all students are issued laptops), use of technology by students and faculty is a major learning objective on the campus. Both faculty and students are trained in the use of Flashlight assessment, a technological program designed for easy development of surveys by faculty and staff members. Flashlight surveys were conducted throughout the year to monitor student satisfaction and gather feedback from freshman academy faculty teams to assess the program. A freshman academy team survey in fall 2005, freshman academy final assessment in fall 2005, mid-term student assessment of case managers in 2006, and freshman academy final survey in spring 2006 were all administered online. Two student focus groups were conducted by the Counseling and Testing Center in spring 2006.

Findings

In the first and second semesters of the Freshman Academy Learning Community Program (fall 2005 and spring 2006), polled faculty members found the case managers to be the most effective component of the administrative services provided for them. The case managers did a good to outstanding job

in the fall according to 95% of the faculty, and 91% of the faculty said that the case managers did a good to outstanding job in the spring. Faculty member comments showed that case managers provided additional support for at-risk students, as well as being liaisons between students, faculty members, and parents. Since creating a learning community environment was a key component of the Freshman Academy Learning Community and the Case Manager Program, this was a positive response.

One faculty member's comment supported the idea that case managers were successful because they were not in positions of authority or evaluation for students, "The case manager was a neutral person for students to communicate with and to assist with difficulties with professors." In addition, one student commented, "My case manager worked in the IT department, and he helped me think about whether I wanted to go into computer science or computer engineering." This comment supported the idea that students need regular contact with campus personnel in a variety of jobs. Advice from someone already in a computer-related field is likely to be more believable to a first-year college student than a conversation about computer careers delivered by a professor in a different career.

Another comment by a student, and the case manager's reaction to it, showed how the case managers benefited from interactions with students: "My case manager helped me get my financial aid forms completed and helped me search for scholarships. She was the most helpful person to me this semester." The case manager was a member of the financial aid staff. Although every freshman attends a financial aid session in the orientation class, not everyone understands all of the information given there or is willing to follow up with the financial aid members.

The case manager from the financial aid office reported that her special contact with the students from her block was invaluable to her professionally. Because she had more than the usual interaction with freshmen, such as special conversations about financial aid and other student concerns, she was able to apply some of the questions and answers she had with the students into the information sessions she conducted with the freshman class as a whole. For campus personnel who interact with students daily in a professional capacity, having different kinds of conversations with students is an invaluable community-building experience. By sharing student, faculty, and staff concerns across a variety of university departments and offices, new conversations and practices took place.

For example, orientation teachers or other block faculty members contacted case managers if a particular student was having difficulty. The case manager would contact the student via phone call, e-mail, class visit, or dormitory visit. Students quickly began to notice that their learning block was a community where faculty and staff communicated regularly. Students began to see that their class behavior—attendance, class participation, homework, quizzes, and tests—was noted across their communities, and their case managers might actually have good advice. Faculty members were grateful to have additional support for their

students, and all parties involved discussed approaches to student success in college.

In addition, many students were willing to speak openly to mentors who did not grade their academic efforts or report on their behavior in living spaces. For example, one student who was not responding to e-mails or phone messages from her orientation teacher went to see her case manager, a benefits coordinator. When the benefits coordinator called the student's dorm and asked to see her, the student agreed. The student was scared to see her professor; however, the benefits coordinator was able to help the student overcome that fear, and she sought help in the academic support labs.

Moreover, this student and others had important, lifelong learning and career journey discussions with their case managers, in part, because they saw their case managers as people who had good advice and were successful in careers outside of education. In a variety of instances, students responded about campus issues to case managers more readily than they did to their professors. Also, since most students were not considering careers in teaching, they were more willing to discuss possible careers with, for example, the director of public relations or an employee in the Information Technology Department. Finally, faculty interaction with case managers increased their knowledge of campus procedures, and case manager interactions with faculty members and students helped them understand their larger relationships to the campus. Communication was improved in the Freshman Academy Learning Community as a result of the inclusion of case managers to the block configuration.

A sample of what the faculty members had to say about the Case Manager Program may be seen in Table 1.

Table 1
Freshman Academy Faculty Survey (Online Flashlight Survey)

Question	Response Fall 2005 N = 37	Response Spring 2006 N = 23
Rate the effectiveness of the case managers to the teaching and learning process this semester.	38% Outstanding 30% Excellent 27% Good (95% good or higher)	43% Outstanding 22% Excellent 26% Good (91% good or higher)
Rate the effectiveness of the case manager meetings to the teaching and learning process this semester.	16% Outstanding 53% Excellent 28% Good (97% good or higher)	14% Outstanding 29% Excellent 33% Good (76% good or higher)

Overall, what were the major contributions of the case managers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The extra person to guide students and support in the manner in which he did.• The case manager was a neutral person for students to communicate with and to assist with difficulties with professors. On the contrary, they were a source for instructors to use to help get students on track in classes.• The case manager in my block was very effective in scheduling and chaperoning cocurricular activities. He also assisted in student interventions.• The case managers were good at giving the students another voice and another person who cared about his/her academic existence.• Offering another viewpoint to the student issues for finding solutions.• She was a liaison between faculty and students.• Following up with students having problems; helping track down missing students and relaying information to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our case manager was actively engaged in the classroom and with all activities.• The case manager helped resolve situations of students with particular difficulties.• The case manager did an outstanding job building a rapport with the students, helping us to give special assistance (counseling, etc.) to students who needed it.• Counseling students, support for attendance, link with students and parents, intervening with at-risk students.• Pizza party for block; worked one-on-one with many students; helped organize and participated in cocurricular assignments.• Very helpful, well organized, and really interacted with the students on a one-on-one basis.
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Analysis of the responses to the question, “How can the role of the case manager be improved?” and student statements from the mid-term student assessment of case managers in spring 2006 have fashioned the improvements scheduled for recruitment and training of case managers for the 2006–2007 Freshman Academy Learning Community. In particular, only those case managers who have the time and commitment necessary to make regular contact with students have been invited back to participate. Also, case managers will go to orientation classes to make formal introductions of themselves and the services they can provide to students. Further training of case managers in university policies and procedures is ongoing, and a concerted effort to train faculty members and case managers so that they will have the same information is underway. Finally, sharing the faculty and student concerns with the case managers is part of the continuous quality improvement that the program practices.

Additional data from the freshman academy student final assessment in fall 2005 and spring 2006 and the mid-term student assessment of case managers in spring 2006 showed some additional statistics that need to be addressed (see Table 2). In particular, communication with case managers decreased: 79% of students stated that they communicated with their case managers at least one time in the fall while 65% of the students communicated with their case managers

at least one time in the spring. This could be a by-product of good orientation and adjustment of students to college life; however, further questions to students and case managers might shed some light on these statistics. Since this is the first year of the program, additional questions will have to be asked to find the answers to this statistical decline.

Table 2
Freshman Academy Student Final Assessment (Fall 2005 and Spring 2006) and Mid-Term Student Assessment of Case Managers (Spring 2006) (Online Flashlight Survey) *Note: Some Survey Questions were only administered in the fall or spring.

Question	Response Fall 2005 N = 109	Response Spring 2006 N = 259
I received communication from my block's case manager.	1-3 Times: 41% 4-5 Times: 21% 6-7 Times: 10% 8 or more: 7% (79% met at least one time.)	1-3 Times: 34% 4-5 Times: 15% 6-7 Times: 16% 8 or more: NA (65% met at least one time.)
My academic success improved because of my contact with my case manager.		Strongly Agree: 14% Agree: 34% (48% were pleased by case manager contact.)
My academic success improved because of my relationship with my case manager.		Strongly Agree: 13% Agree: 38% (51% were pleased by case manager relationship.)
This semester primary contact with my case manager was by:		In Class: 34% E-mail: 21% Telephone: 1% Office Hours: 4% By Appointment: 3%
Did the case manager assist you in accessing campus resources (tutoring, financial aid, etc.)?		Yes: 63%
Do you feel that the case manager followed up with your concerns?		Yes: 65%
Was the information you received from the case manager accurate?		Yes: 81%
This semester primary communication with my case manager has been:		In Class: 34% E-mail: 21% Telephone: 1% Office Hours: 4% By Appointment: 3%

Conclusion

Nonfaculty and non-student affairs personnel in JCSU's Freshman Academy Learning Community Case Manager Program were trained about the complex processes and nature of a college community in order to understand and be able to answer the questions of new students. Students benefited from learning from, listening to, and watching college personnel reflect upon and find answers to issues about campus policies and procedures new to both them and the students. Students profited from hearing how college personnel turned their own educational journeys into career paths, and the college personnel enjoyed reflecting on their own passages. The accessibility of staff beyond the classroom further complemented the students' ability to navigate the complexities of campus life.

Faculty members enjoyed having additional help from case managers for first-year college students, and case managers enjoyed hearing about the campus environment from students. Because members of campus from a wide variety of departments and offices were interacting, one of the major goals of a learning community—communication—was truly expanded.

According to Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) in "Theoretical Considerations in the Study of Minority Student Retention in Higher Education":

Students will elect to stay or leave college not so much because of a theory, but because college and university faculty and administrators have made transformative shifts in governance, curriculum development, in- and out-of-class teaching and learning, student programming and other institutional dimensions that affect students on a daily basis. Consequently, connecting retention research to field practitioners and policy makers in new and creative ways that involve collaborative relationships and mutual learning experiences can take student retention research to a whole new level of theoretical accuracy and applicability. (p. 22)

The Case Manager Program at JCSU was an attempt at "collaborative relationships and mutual learning experiences" in an effort to improve student retention.

Other first-year programs should consider using nonfaculty and non-student affairs personnel in their programs because preliminary analysis of this model suggests that true campus-wide involvement in the educational journeys of students takes place when a variety of campus personnel interact with students and faculty members. In addition, students who are unable or unwilling to talk to those directly involved with their academic or social activities on campus are likely to open up to different kinds of university personnel. Finally, it truly takes a university village to graduate a student; the Case Manager Program is an attempt

to improve graduation rates, as well as improve retention through an all-inclusive learning community environment.

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